

## Europe Day Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2020

### Social Enterprise at the Heart of European Solidarity and Cohesion



In May 2019 Rural Ireland's participation in Europe since 1973 was celebrated with a Citizens Dialogue event in Dunhill Ecopark organised by EU Direct from Waterford's Central Library supported by EU Commission Office staff in Dublin. The crucial role of social enterprise in engaging, empowering and challenging the inventiveness of people in their local communities was addressed on the evening. Local leaders know the needs of their communities and the best solutions.

The EU dialogue was a very successful event with close on 200 people attending the evening session which started at 6.30 p.m. The dialogue was held in the ecopark yard on a glorious if not so warm early summer's evening. Food and refreshments were served from the Education Centre. Local voluntary organisations and clubs displayed samples of their activities in two large rooms and outside on tables in the yard. An open fronted tent with platform and microphones facilitated the speakers who presented on relevant topics relating to rural Ireland in a European context.

Speakers included Gerry Kiely EU Commission Office Dublin, Patrick Klein, EU Commission, Brussels, Brendan Whelan CEO of SFF and Chair of Social Enterprise Task Force and Janet O'Toole Manager of Connemara West a very progressive social enterprise company in West Galway.

In 2020 a second Citizens Dialogue was organised for this month, May, in St Patrick's Gateway in Waterford City. It had to be postponed due to COVID19 restrictions. It will be held on a future date when safe to do so.

### **Surprised and Delighted.**

The organisers of the 2019 event were pleasantly surprised at the attendance and interest in EU affairs. It was held at a time when Brexit was being hotly debated on the airwaves. Loud explanations were being put forward by a divided UK as to why it decided to leave and were being rebutted by Remainers. Northern Ireland and Scotland had voted to remain but in the main Unionists voted to leave, adding complexity to the UK's overall decision to leave. Many Irish people were and are utterly convinced that membership of the EU has transformed Irish economy and society for the better.

### **Communications Through Engagement with Communities**

A secondary issue of concern raised was growing instability of political systems across EU states, UK, Ireland North and South and worldwide. If the EU Commission wants to strengthen its unity of purpose mandate it has serious work on its hands. Communities are where the people live (voters). A primary vehicle through which relevant information can be disseminated is through social enterprise projects in which all types of people are involved in all sorts of ways. Social enterprise projects involve elderly and youth, women and men, employed and unemployed, native and migrant, abled and those with disabilities. They promote intergenerational learning, between people with shared responsibilities and interests, where problems can be avoided or dealt with at source, where social and economic cohesion is possible within socio-economic eco-systems, where volunteers want to and can improve their communities and living standards.

The EU commission needs to develop a local community communications policy and implement it. The EU supports so many developments on the ground including social, economic, environment, heritage, education, health, security, disadvantage and quality of life but it is seldom that the dots are connected between what is happening on the ground and the support received from EU programmes. A new communications approach is needed by government and EU over next 5/10 years to highlight the positive, progressive changes and benefits of EU membership. EU citizens dialogue events are a start.

### **Brexit and European Union**

There is growing concern with the concept of the big state and its distance from everyday lives of its citizens. This is both a national and EU issue. In the ongoing debate on Brexit the positive role of EU membership and solidarity received a lot of attention and the following issues were highlighted:

- Preservation of world peace
- Respect for democratic politics
- Growth in economic prosperity
- Management of climate change,
- Coordination of international security
- Free travel and employment within EU
- Progress through enabling directives, funding investments and supports

- Commitment to human rights and equality of opportunity for all citizens
- Cultural diversity, respect and recognition among nation states for each other's traditions and cultural richness

A contrary list of issues was highlighted by Leavers.

### **COVID19 and European Union.**

With the arrival of COVID19 many of the deepest concerns expressed on Brexit were more pronounced. COVID19, is a global disease that has challenged the health and economic systems of so many countries. It is an unwelcome example of why the EU is so important to Ireland both South and North. In this time of great crisis EU membership became a sanctuary of sorts. We are no longer on her own but a member of an EU27 group of states who are committed to helping each other deal with the problems and in recovering socially and economically in the future. The EU are leading the worldwide research for a cure, a vaccine, anti-viral drug, sharing of resources, learning from each other, underpinning of economic foundations with EU loans and grants and ongoing access to EU markets. All these actions provide the Republic of Ireland with a chance to recover and avoid the most disastrous consequences of the pandemic.

Can anyone in our country imagine what it would be like if we were not a member of the European Union and we were even more dependent on UK and its economy. Would the Good Friday agreement have ever been signed with EU and US acting as guarantors of an international agreement? Would we be as prosperous and as socially progressive outside the EU over the past 47 years of membership? It isn't obvious how we could have developed our current level of prosperity and social cohesion without the massive support, financial, research, travel, knowledge exchange, market access to 500 million consumers and benefits of progressive legislation from EU.

### **Emigration as Release Valve**

The old Irish solution to economic crises and recessions invariably included free and open access to global emigration. That solution is now no longer so freely available outside the EU. Irish people are renowned for their creativity, adaptability and hard work. They have over the centuries proven very successful in every country in the world in which they choose to settle. Post COVID 19, Irish society and economy will recover in time. It will recover with the help of a young educated population, a 70 million diaspora capable of opening up direct links with every country worldwide.

### **A Europe - For the People- By the People!**

A major resource to draw on is membership of EU and engagement with its power, resources, imagination, innovation and economic and cultural resilience. The EU provides Ireland with many supports and opportunities which will enable it carve out a New Ireland, a Better Ireland, a More Socially Cohesive and Prosperous Ireland. Without EU membership it is hard to see how we could recover without suffering excessive hardships such as a 19<sup>th</sup> century famine like experience. It is certain EU membership will be key to future progress over next five to ten years. It needs though to be explained better to 'communities' of people and interest through more dedicated and imaginative country strategies.

It needs to be communicated through regeneration and transformation projects in which people are engaged and are empowered to develop the projects, own the projects and sustain the projects over the long term for the benefit of their communities. Europe needs to become a more visible partner, friend to every small community in Ireland over the next five years. It can be best done through social enterprise initiatives and support programmes. The continent that works, adapts, collaborates together becomes more truly interdependent is most likely to remain united in purpose and aspiration in an ever increasing global, one world entity.

So on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2020 I ask you all to raise your glasses and drink a toast to a future Europe that is secure, united, disease free, peaceful and prosperous!.

Senan Cooke, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2020.